DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 351 689 CS 213 584

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TITLE Bridging the Gap between Peer Response in the Classroom and Teacher Expectation: Three Stories.
PUB DATE Oct 92
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Peer Tutoring in Writing Conference (9th, Indiana, PA, October 23-24, 1992).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Environment; Course Descriptions; *Freshman Composition; Higher Education; *Peer Evaluation; Portfolios (Background Materials); Teacher Expectations of Students; *Teacher Role; *Writing Evaluation; Writing Workshops
IDENTIFIERS Alternative Assessment; Florida State University; *Personal Writing

ABSTRACT

Combining three strategies, a composition instructor has attempted to bridge the gap between peer response and teacher expectation in the first-year writing course taught at Florida State University. The focus is on writing that is exploratory and based on personal experience. The instructor: (1) establishes a criteria for producing and evaluating exploratory writing; (2) uses class time for extensive student discussion of student text; and (3) uses a grading system that involves the teacher and the students as well. The students and the instructor value five elements (self-involvement; curiosity; risk; thought; and discovery) in exploratory writing and make those elements the basis of assignments, discussion, and evaluation in the writing process. The format of the class centers on open classroom workshops. The paper portion of students' end-of-course portfolio is graded by the student, three peers chosen by lottery, and by the instructor. The workshops are a forum for communication of ideas, and all participants are free from any restraint or artificial tool, such as anonymity. Despite the success of teaching the course during a summer session, the instructor became unsure of her role as a teacher and went back to grading each essay in the traditional manner. Perhaps the instructor can let go of some of that traditional teacher authority if she can learn to trust the students for their individuality, thinking ability, and responsibility. (RS)

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Sandra Gail Teichmann

Paper presented at the 9th Annual
National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing
at Indiana University of Pennsylvania
October 23-24, 1992

Bridging the Gap
Between Peer Response in the Classroom and Teacher Expectation: Three Stories

Story #1: Lisa

Last year I overheard Lisa, a student in first-year writing, discuss an essay she had written about her disappointment at not being chosen prom queen her senior year in high school. In the draft she discussed, Lisa lamented her lost moment of glory, and then blamed the student body who hadn't selected her and blamed her parents for having been too strict about her social activities. Lisa's peer group, peer tutors, thought the paper was great and told her they understood her feelings totally. Lisa's teacher understood her feelings too, but didn't consider the paper great because Lisa had not yet formulated an idea and extended it in a push toward making a discovery for herself about what this experience of loss meant. Lisa was confused. If her peers thought the paper was great, why didn't the teacher also think so?

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By combining three strategies I have been more or less

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successful in bridging this gap between peer response and teacher expectation in the first-year writing courses I teach at Florida State University. In these courses where the focus is on writing that is exploratory and based on personal experience, I 1) establish a criteria for producing and evaluating exploratory writing, 2) use class time for extensive student discussion of student text, and 3) use a grading system that involves not just me the teacher, but the student and peers as well.

In my first-year writing courses, the students and I value five elements in exploratory writing and make these five the basis of assignments, discussion and evaluation in our writing process:

1) self-involvement, which is an active engagement with both the subject being written about and the writing process.
2) curiosity, which is a sincere and delving interest into the subject of the writing and the meaning of that subject in relation to the self.
3) risk, which is unpredictable thought or leaps into unexplored areas with the purpose of coming to new understanding for self.
4) thought, which is the source and development of new and individual ideas.
5) discovery, which is coming to a new understanding of or learning something new about the subject of the writing through the use of the previous four elements.

The first day of class, I introduce the idea that writing in this course is exploratory, the subject of the writing will come from personal experience and the writing will be done for purposes of personal discovery. Starting with the information sheet and continuing through class discussions and individual letters written back and forth working toward an understanding about each of the elements independently and finally all of the elements as a unit, the students and I come to one mind on what makes for good exploratory writing. We begin thinking of this exploratory writing as an intellectual conversation which we carry on with each other through the papers we write during the semester.

For a conversation to be successful and rewarding, the participants must have respect for each other. So also it is that writers and readers must have respect: teacher for students, students for teacher, and students for each other. Agreeing on this basic formality in my classes, we come to understand that <u>self-involvement</u> is as fundamental to writing as it is to holding a conversation. This self-involvement is a matter of self-disclosure. This is each participant being his or her individual, unique self. As writers (speakers) we have to disclose who we are and what our thoughts are in relation to the subject we are writing or talking about. As readers (responders), we also have to disclose who we are and what our thoughts are about the work we read or the idea we have listened to. A certain equality of individual disclosure needs to be

established for a meaningful discourse to develop, a discourse that involves writing, submitting text for reading, considering response to the reading, rewriting and so on . . .

The next element, curiosity, like self-involvement is also a necessary characteristic for both the writer and the reader as the subject of either a writing or a conversation is explored. To conduct an exploration, a writer must be interested in and curious about the subject or idea he/she is writing about. In response to this exploration, the readers must also have an intent interest in the subject, and if not in the subject, then at least in the writer, who is respected for his/her work toward discovering new meaning about the subject of the writing. The writer tries to figure things out in the paper; the readers try to understand the efforts and respond with interest and questions about the subject, leading the writer to a revision that furthers the writing exploration.

The third element, risk, also desirable in both writer and reader, is a willingness to think about the subject of the writing in a way never thought out before. By risking new ideas, the exploration becomes interesting, becomes more than small talk and cliche, becomes intellectual, and the persons engaged are enthused and motivated on to more thought toward new understanding.

The fourth element, thought, seems anticlimactic after the excitement of risk, but thought or the making of meaning is necessary if the writing is to command the attention of both

writer and reader. Empty ideas, empty words, quirky notions, empty brilliant attempts to look at a subject in a new way are for naught if the ideas are not extended to a point where the new knowledge can be assimilated into a whole of understandable meaning.

Discovery, the fifth element, is the goal of this exploratory writing. Good exploratory writing like good conversation can end in new meaning, new understanding of self, of self in relation to society, in relation to the environment of this world. Those writers and conversationalists who know this, who have experienced this, have courage to start a new demanding writing process or a new conversation once again. Through our belief in human individual potential to make meaning for self in relation to the world and through our experience of having done so in our own personal writing or conversations, those of us who are teachers encourage and push our students through the messy, frightening and always uncharted courses of first-year writing because for these students, having experience in coming to new understanding through writing, through discourse is the basis, the whole of the university learning process.

The format of my class centers on open classroom workshops. If the class is as large as 26, I sometimes divide the students into two groups and then assign student members to lead the workshops and/or invite other working writers/teachers to be guests as workshop leaders and/or participants. As the students and I read and respond to each others' writing throughout the

semester, we view the papers through the lens of the five elements of good exploratory writing, discuss the work, and make written comments accordingly with the intent of encouraging and furthering the writing and understanding through a revision process. If Lisa were a member of my class she would have an opportunity to respond with curiosity and thought to the interest and questions put to her by her peers in an effort to come to some meaning both for herself and for her readers of the senior-year disappointment.

As a means of bringing the classroom together as a whole unit, I am a working writer with the class. One reason for wanting to be a teacher/writer is to act as role model, but more importantly to gain entry into what could be a closed circle of students. I write the same essays I assign the students to write. I write the same letters and the same journal entries. The students respond to my work as they do their peers' in workshop discussion and in written comments. I try not to separate myself from the students, try not to make myself above them or in control of them as I work to make the classroom a place where each writer learns from every other writer.

With the intent of allowing each person in our writing community the authority necessary to fully participate in our conversation-like exploratory writing, I have put in place a system of grading that involves not just the teacher, but the teacher, the peers and the student. At the end of the term, students gather all their course writings into a final portfolio.

The essay portion is then graded by five persons: the student, three peers chosen by lottery, and me. Every paper we grade is evaluated based on the presence of the five elements of good exploratory writing. Though these elements are abstract, that is, not as definable as a misplaced modifier, it is still quite possible for a reader (teacher or student) to determine the presence or absence of the five elements through the author's selection and arrangement of language and evaluate the paper based on our five point criterion. For an author to earn an A on a paper, the work must show adequate evidence of all five criteria.

The paper Lisa wrote about her disappointment in not being chosen prom queen may have met the self-involvement aspect of good exploratory writing as she engaged herself with telling the past experience and expressing her feelings about that event. Because she chose to write about the prom queen disappointment, she may have been curious about the incident, but through her use of language, there was no evidence that she was curious in the paper, just as there was no evidence that she was thinking about the subject in a new way, let alone thinking about the event toward the purpose of making meaning. Therefore Lisa could not have made a discovery for herself. Her paper was little more than a recollection of an event, an expression of her feelings with which her peers could identify. In a course where the writing focus is on exploration of personal experience toward coming to some new understanding, a paper like Lisa's would not

yet command the attention necessary to sustain a lengthy conversation.

Story #2: Three Students Responding

One day last week I was eavesdropping again. Sitting in my office, I overheard three students in the hallway as they were reading and responding to peer papers. First one student said, "Can you believe me? I'm writing here that this guy's story about graduation night reminds me about our graduation party and all my friends at school last year. On Sheila's paper about being shy, I wrote that I know just how she feels in front of a bunch of people expecting her to say something brilliant. Can you believe I am writing these comments, as if either Sheila or Greg cared what I think."

A second student followed with, "Well, I always write 'flows smoothly' and 'interesting paper.'" If you ever get that note on your paper, you'll know who wrote it."

And the third said, "Yeah, I write that sometimes, but mostly I just say, 'good paper, I like it.'"

As I listened, it sounded to me like these students were in a class where the criteria for good writing had not been clearly defined and the commenting was anonymous. In my classes, the peer responses are not anonymous. To the idea that anonymity protects the workshop from the "defensive and combative" writer and protects that writer from him or herself, I tentatively agree writers can be hurt when they get less than praise for their

efforts, but I think that these are lessons writer's need to learn and learn fast if their intent is to get into the stew of ideas, problems, tragedies of life. They have to learn that there are and always will be ideas and experiences about life that do not match their own, that the experience of life is that of negotiation more than that of receiving praise.

Open peer response in workshop is valuable interaction for the process of discovering who we are in relation to our peers. In my classroom, workshops are a forum for communication of ideas, and all participants are free from any restraint or artificial tool, such as anonymity, which could interfere in this exchange. Students need a incentive to write which can be met with the expectations and interest of a group of persons willing to respectfully listen and responsibably respond to unique and new ideas.

In my class room, each reader has a basis in the five aspects of good writing for a valid response to the ideas being expressed. Even though at the end of the semester, we use the five qualities for evaluating work that has been through multiple revision, the five-point criterion is designed with the intent of encouraging and furthering writing, not that of evaluating,

One good thing about the three comments I overheard in the hall last week is that they were not negative in tone, but they were not encouraging either. The kind of responses I model and expect my students to emulate are those that cheer the writer on toward a possible discovery. Addressing the success each writer

has with each of the five elements of good exploratory writing is a means of helping the writer push for the discovery.

The first student's statement, "Can you believe I am writing these comments, as if either Sheila or Greg cared what I think," is an interesting commentary on communication between individuals in our society. The student who said this, either lacks confidence in her ability to respond to another student's thoughts an/or does not believe that what she has to say will be valued by another person. My teacher, self and peer grading system establishes peer authority to the point that each class member is considered a valued reader by his or her peers. By being responsible for actual grading, the students, as peer tutors, are functioning in reality rather than play acting, and the teacher is no longer the separate person in the classroom respected only as evaluator because she holds the blue grade book.

Through the use of my good-writing paradigm, extensive teacher and student discussion of student text and teacher, peer and self grading, I work to make the classroom an interactive environment for thinking and exploration. Regardless of generational and role differences, student, peers and teacher in this classroom respect and communicate with each other from a common base, a set of values supporting and encouraging thinking and good exploratory writing.

Story #3: Me, Teacher of Writing

In a first-year writing class I taught this summer, the students graded each other and themselves, and after I had included my evaluation of each student's work and participation in the average that determined each student's final grade, I felt somewhat unsettled. Even though the grades from A to C were distributed approximately the same as the two previous classes I had taught, (one where I graded each assigned essay in the traditional way and one where I graded a final portfolio) I was uneasy. Had I not really played the role of a teacher? Had I given up too much control? Did each student get the grade he or she deserved?

As I planned the course I'm teaching now this fall, I was so unsure of my image as teacher, that I went back to grading each essay in the traditional way but gave myself the option of changing to student/peer/teacher grading on any one of the essays if I so wished. So far, even though I have had the students "practice" peer and self grading, I have been the one person to determine the grade that counts on the first two essays. Only now that we're writing the third essay, am I gaining the courage necessary to let go again. By working through the theory behind and the practice of peer and self grading in this paper I'm reading to you, I am gaining confidence in student ability and honesty and coming to see and accept myself as a teacher in the role of conveyor of values. I am, I want to be a conveyor of values rather than a supreme evaluator. If my criteria for good writing is valid and if the students accept and understand the

criteria as the basis for the work produced in this course, the individual writer and his or her peers along with me should be the logical evaluators of this semester of writing. The students will not only gain experience in applying the criteria to their personal writing, but they will gain understanding and experience in applying the criteria to the writing of others. By making student evaluation count toward a final grade, the students will come to understand the seriousness of their judgement as well as the viability of the our established criteria for good writing.

What happened to me between the end of summer session and the planning for fall semester? I think, despite the success of the summer session, I became frightened and unsure of my theory in a system where tradition has it that the teacher is a teacher and an evaluator. If I'm not the evaluator, am I the teacher? Or even further, if the students are teaching each other, am I the teacher? What is the role I am to play if I am not a teacher? To ensure my identity, I went back to the safety of the traditional teacher/evaluator. Thinking back to a paper I wrote with my class last fall, I identified myself there as an outfitter, a person who guides and enables the class members to write just as an outfitter guides and enables an inexperienced hunter to get a shot at a bear. If I can think of myself as an outfitter, as just another writer, struggling through another writing exploration with the eighteen to twenty-six other writers in our temporary writing community, just another reader applying the criteria of good writing, perhaps I can let go of some of

that traditional teacher authority again. If I can learn to trust, trust the students for their individuality, thinking ability and responsibility and trust and believe in myself as a conveyor and supporter of a set of good-writing values maybe I can let go.

Respect is essential in the classroom. If I truly respect my students as I say I do and as I expect them to respect me, I must trust them and trust myself to function fully in a non-traditional way where peer tutors are given responsibility that signals they are as valuable in the writing process toward making meaning as I am.